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The Oppenheimer Case

Security on Trial.
By Philip M. Stern.
With the collaboration of Harold P. Green, and a special commentary by Lloyd K. Garrison.
591 pp. New York: Harper & Row. $10.

By GERALD HOLTON

During the decade of the 1940's, two mighty weapon systems were fashioned in the United States. Both are still very much with us. One is the nuclear bomb, in good part the work of a group of scientists and engineers at Los Alamos under the direction of J. Robert Oppenheimer. The other is the "security system," under which Government agencies investigate the actions, opinions, associations, private lives and political beliefs of individuals. Oppenheimer himself became a prominent victim of the security system in its abuse.

This invaluable and timely book of Philip Stern traces the story in all its fascinating and horrifying detail, right down to the core of the case—the limits of dissent allowed to a scientist working with the military. Not only will the book help us to understand better the period of the forties and fifties, but it may do more: In the current atmosphere of high-level attacks on dissent, and in the battle to reassert civilian control over national destiny, the book may well provide a scenario for analogous events that are foreseeable for the early seventies.

The subtitle of the book, "Security on Trial," identifies its chief content. For it was not only Oppenheimer who was on trial when his fitness to remain a Government consultant was investigated by an A.E.C. Hearing Board under the chairmanship of Gordon Gray in 1954. Stern shows how the rules and procedures of the security system worked, what their effect, purpose, and current potentials are. The Board stated frankly, "We are acutely aware that in a very real sense this case puts the security system of the United States on trial."

Then the Board went on to define a new concept: "We believe it has been demonstrated [by these proceedings] that the Government can search its own soul and the soul of an individual whose relationship to his Government is in question." While the Board members thought this was done with "full protection of the rights and interests of both," we see here the danger of the concept of soul search, and the fragility of the most elementary rules of due process in the pursuit of that game. If the story sometimes reads as if it were the transcript of a purge trial in Czechoslovakia, it may be because the record was originally not meant to be publicly accessible. The chief hearing transcript was declassified after an A.E.C. Commissioner accidentally lost his summary on a train.

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Oppenheimer was somehow a fitting hero for the tragedy that befell him; his strengths and weaknesses were both built on a grandiose scale. The frail, hypnotic man was first of all a beloved teacher and an impressive contributor to physics who set the style for students and colleagues. He came to be both one of the most thoroughly cultivated among American scientists and also virtually the last man who still tried, with much success, to understand the whole range of major contemporary problems in theoretical physics. His eloquence in many fields of scholarship was legendary, as was his gift for effective leadership.

To the end of his days he could rise in almost any seminar on current work to point out to the reporting physicist a significant connection or improvement. Usually he did so with lucid elegance, but sometimes with withering disdain. Both these traits later became of consuming interest to those who had to judge him against the requirements of the security system. For while he was very often right, he was sometimes wrong and destructive. And with all his erudition he never overcame an early political naiveté. To the men who tried to search his soul, it must have seemed that it contained a strange mixture: part Ulysses, part Faust, part Prince Myshkin.

When Oppenheimer left his sheltered position at the Berkeley and California Institute of Technology physics departments to accept the leadership of the Los Alamos Laboratory in 1942 at the urging of Gen. Leslie Groves, he had already helped to make the United States a center for advances in contemporary physics. Now he put his charisma to work on building up a secret city, to do the unaccustomed, engineering-type war work of converting theoretical speculations into a fearful weapon in a race against the German effort.

General Groves, who stood by him to the end, had chosen Oppenheimer well. Oppy could get almost anyone to join him, and he was the mainspring of the lab throughout. Later, on the various policy and advisory boards in which he was immersed immediately after the war, the same ability to make a group work at its best and to provide persuasive arguments and summaries was attested to by such colleagues as James B. Conant, I. I. Rabi, Cyril Smith and Vannevar Bush. As one of them said later, "Robert would put things so clearly that after he had spoken, no one else felt there was any need to do any thinking."

It was just this that came to worry the Air Force and particularly the Strategic Air Command (S.A.C.), when Oppenheimer's policy advice seemed to go against them. At the Gray Board Hearing, Air Force Gen. Roscoe Charles ("Bim") Wilson ("I am first of all a big-bomb man"), who was sent there explicitly on orders from the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, explained to the judges some of his gathering doubts about Oppenheimer:

1. Oppenheimer's support for the Acheson-Lilienthal-Baruch postwar plan to internationalize atomic energy controls—"when the U.S. had a monopoly."

2. Oppenheimer's doubts about the early feasibility of nuclear-powered aircraft (correct doubts, as it turned out), in contrast to his apparently smaller doubts concerning the possibility of nuclear-powered ships—just when the Air Force was fighting the Navy for budget and dominion.

3. Oppenheimer's approach to the Hydrogen-Bomb project, an approach that showed "more conservatism than the Air Force would have liked."

4. Then, revealing his most pertinent worry, the General confessed: "I would like to say that the fact that . . . he is such a brilliant man, the fact that he has such a command of the English language, such national prestige, such powers of persuasion, only made me nervous, because I felt if this was so it would not be to the interest of the United States, in my judgment. It was for

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